

Platte Valley Habitat Partnership Field Trip Minutes

July 20, 2012

Sign-in Sheet: Rick King, Ian Tator, Paula Gunther, Jessica Clement, Duane Short, Shelby Perry, Jim Freeburn, Colin Tierney, Christina Barrineau, Matthew Copland, Scott Kerbs, Stephanie Painter, Greg Ryan, Jim States, Jeff Streeter, Mae Smith, Joe Parsons, Brian Mealor, Joe Elder, Chelsea Biondofillo, Monty Lane, Mark Conduct, Val Conduct, Wendy Haas, Andrew Coulter, Rachel Mealor, Mike Conduct, Robert Worthington, Leah Burgess, Clay Sondgeroth, Heath Cline, Charley Morton, Joel Humphries, Biff Burton, Will Schultz, Terry Creekmore, Ryan Kenneda, Ryan Amundson, Bill Gerhart, Daryl Lutz.

Opening Remarks: Jessica explained that PVHP has a deadline to create their first mule deer habitat plan and that it might be time to adapt the collaborative process to accommodate the needs of public land agencies and their stakeholders, and private landowners specifically but at the same time (see power point presentation on WGFD's PVHP website). She proposed a draft schedule for upcoming meetings and suggested that the group create two working groups: one to focus on private land issues and one to focus on public land issues. Everyone is welcome to participate in both groups, but after consulting with a number of private landowners in the Valley, she felt this would create better access to the collaborative process for the landowners in this manner. She recommended a series of evening meetings during August, September and October for the landowner issues, and continued day meetings for the public lands issues.

Comments:

- Don't lose private land input regarding public land due to the timing of the meeting schedule (day versus evening).
- There is a problem in that the majority of the meetings are scheduled to be held during hunting season when landowners and hunters will be unable to attend.
- We need to keep the August meeting for public land but reschedule the Sept/Oct meetings until Nov/Dec to accommodate landowners and hunters during hunting season.
- Look at the habitat while the deer are on the winter range in Jan/Feb rather than during the summer.

Based on the above deliberations, the group decided unanimously using thumbs that the Landowner Working Group will meet later in August for the first meeting and continue in November and December. There will be no Landowner Working Group meetings in September or October. The Public Lands Working Group will meet on August 17, and on dates to be announced in September, October and onwards.

ZN Ranch

The ZN Ranch was purchased in 1976 and is managed by George and Chris Williams.

1st stop

The first stop was the location of an enclosure that excluded cattle grazing. The intent was to see if the species composition of shrubs differed in the grazed versus nongrazed areas. The result is that there may be an increase in rabbit brush over silver sage but there was no Wyoming big sage present.

The next discussion concerned a burn that removed bitterbrush.

- It takes about 3 years for Wyoming big sage and bitterbrush to return following a low intensity burn.
- Spring burns tend to create a mosaic of burned and unburned habitat while fall burns tend to be more complete.
- Yearling grazing is high intensity and short duration while grazing cow/calf pairs is lower intensity, longer term grazing.
- Bitterbrush is the preferred shrub species for mule deer. Big sage (Wyoming and Mountain) is preferred over silver sage.

2nd stop

The second stop was the location of a 2,000 acre Spike treatment intended to thin the sage brush.

- The bentonite component of a Spike pellet results in a release timeline of up to 3 years.
- A spike treatment is intended to kill 80% of all vegetation.
- The species composition of an area needs to be determined prior to a Spike application because silver sage and rabbit brush will reestablish faster than more preferred species such as bitterbrush and big sage.
- Hedge classes 1, 2 and 3. Class 1 equals little utilization; class 2 equals moderate utilization while class 3 equals heavy utilization.

Pennock WHMA

- This stop was to discuss the results of a 2009 mowing effort.
- Mowing results in younger more vigorous plants.
- Mowing height is very important.

- Species that resprout such as bitterbrush versus those that don't resprout such as the sage species.
- Mowing allows quicker bitterbrush recovery than fire.
- Mountain big sage versus Wyoming big sage. Mostly mountain big sage at this location.

Twenty to twenty-five year old 10,000 acre spring burn from Deer Creek to south end of the Pennock WHMA (WHMA. BLM, USFS, NEF, WWNRT).

- Treat 50% of decadent shrubs in mosaic pattern.
- South facing rocky or disturbed areas prone to cheatgrass infestation.
- No livestock use since 1984.
- Rest versus deferment. Rest means no grazing while deferment means no growing season grazing.
- Treatment sites need to be chosen to reduce cheatgrass. Don't treat steep, rocky south facing slopes.

A&K Condit Ranch

This stop was intended to highlight the results of the 2011 wildfire and transitional range issues.

The bitterbrush seen in this area was hedge class 1. Why hasn't this bitterbrush been utilized by mule deer?

- Public land disturbance causes the deer to move through this area and retreat to private land to the west.

There is a MOU for this area that specifies that it will be managed for elk.

Elk are the priority species for management but habitat management that benefits mule deer can also occur.

No habitat treatment needed in the 2011 burn for 40 years.

Pennock burn management options:

- Very dry area. Water sources need to be constructed to hold the deer.
- Excessive pressure during hunting season displaces mule deer to private lands. Modified travel management plan?
- Limit access and hunting pressure through hunt season type or establishment of an HMA.

- Increase restrictions on antler hunting.
- Create large scale treatments.
- Install temporary fencing to allow targeted cattle grazing.
- Split hunt seasons to better distribute hunting pressure.
- Drill 300 ft wells on higher ground to allow water distribution.
- \$9,000 for well and \$20,000 for pipe to distribute water.
- If snow blows > 40 feet it evaporates.
- Construct smaller scale demonstration projects to leverage for funding for similar large-scale projects.
- Improved livestock management allows improved wildlife habitat management.
- Very little cheatgrass so far in 2011 burn.
- Big sage before the fire limited cattle grazing. Lack of water also limits grazing. It remains to be seen how the cattle will utilize the burn after the green up.
- The road through this area is private but there have been no limitations on public access. Perhaps an HMA could be established to control access and reduce pressure that displaces mule deer to private land.
- There is an ongoing problem with people leaving the gates open. Perhaps the installation of cattle guards will solve the problem.
- Graze the cheatgrass early for control. Not 100% effective but it does limit cheatgrass to some extent.
- With late season burns the appearance of cheatgrass often occurs up to three years later. Increased nitrogen increases cheatgrass invasion for up to three years.
- Historic sheep grazing in this area. Did sheep grazing versus cattle grazing somehow change the habitat?
- There is no mosaic on this burn. It may take up to two decades for bitter brush to regenerate.
- There is conifer encroachment in aspen stands located to the south of the burn.

Cedar Breaks

- Little or no cattle grazing for the last 18 years.
- Biff Burton referred to a small exclosure and explained that shrub utilization has not changed much since 2001.
- Elk, mule deer and pronghorn all winter in this area
- Bitterbrush can sustain 60-65% utilization
- Sage brush can sustain 45% utilization

- Results of fecal analysis indicate that mule deer diets consisted of 21.7% Wyoming big sage, 18% juniper, 12% bitterbrush.
- There has been historic over use of this area by elk, mule deer and pronghorn.

Potential Habitat Actions

- Spike application but within sage grouse core area stipulations.
- Thin juniper encroachment in draws. There was much discussion about the impact of juniper trees in this area, visually, for wildlife and other ways. The point was made that the country is full of cedar fence posts that came from areas like this.
- The steep rocky topography may make a Spike application the only option.
- The BLM will look for historical photos of the area to compare with the current prevalence of juniper trees.

Brush Creek

- Bark beetles have proliferated in response to drought, warmer winters and decadent lodgepole pine stands.
- There is 75-95% mortality of lodgepole pines due to bark beetles.
- This area utilizes progressive short duration livestock grazing which is very labor intensive.
- The understory species are just beginning to emerge with the removal of the overstory due to beetle kill.
- The USFS has established a 10 year contract to treat 10,000 acres per year to test the effects on understory and stand regeneration.
- Aspen can be regenerated using fire and clear cutting and are already proliferating due to the canopy opening up around dead lodgepole trees.
- Are winter burns a possibility? Intriguing but probably not possible due to the inability of the fire to spread due to the lack of ground fire.
- Increased grass banking for livestock. Increased moisture due to decreased tree cover may allow for alternative grazing strategies.
- The ability to access NF earlier for grazing may reduce the pressure on BLM land.

Submitted by Terry Creekmore and Jessica Clement, 7-24-12